DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 401 CS 013 917

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TITLE Phonics Is Phonics Is Phonics--Or Is It?
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 10p.
AVAILABLE FROM The Riggs Institute, 4185 SW 102nd Ave., Beaverton, OR 97005. Tel: 503-646-9459; Fax: 503-644-5191; e-mail: riggs@riggsinst.org. For full text: http://www.riggsinst.org/artp25.htm.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Instructional Effectiveness; *Literacy; *Phonics; *Spelling; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Spelling Patterns

ABSTRACT

For 60 years, confusion and misinformation have reigned supreme whenever the subject of teaching phonics comes up for discussion. The paper considers various phonics programs, both old and new, and appraises their effectiveness. It also discusses works on phonetics by some well-known researchers and experts in reading, among them Frank Smith, Marilyn Jager Adams, Samuel T. Orton, and Jean Osborne, as well as opinions on education by Ross Perot, William Bennett, and Barbara Bush. Many people speak about phonics but very few have actually defined phonics. Includes the Riggs Institute's phonics list. (NKA)

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Phonics is Phonics is Phonics - Or Is It?

by Myrna T. McCulloch

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6 pages to print.

PHONICS IS PHONICS IS PHONICS - OR IS IT?

by Myrna McCulloch

For sixty years, confusion and misinformation have reigned supreme whenever the subject of teaching phonics comes up for discussion. Witness recent news articles on the marketing success of "Hooked on Phonics." Naturally, to counter this success story, rebuttal articles often quote the establishment which regularly confuses the issue by not really addressing it. Could it be that most major voices in the heated debate haven't a clue as to what, exactly, they are talking about? What phonics? Does one teach phonics for pronunciation only or should we examine letters and combinations of letters which are needed to *spell* English correctly? We need a list so everyone knows the *content* of the debate.

I first learned about one successful phonetic system (we judged it successful because all our students learned to read, write, and spell) twenty-three years ago when I was drafted to administer a failing school in a low socio-economic area of Omaha, Nebraska. After implementing a simple, but complete multi-sensory, "explicit" phonetic, and integrated language arts program, our Afro-American, Hispanic, and students of other ethnic backgrounds finished grade one reading from the World Book, spelling at 3rd to 7th grade levels, mastering the parts of speech, and writing creatively with proper grammar, syntax, capitalization, punctuation, and legible handwriting (whole language capabilities?) They also learned to think and were enjoying classic literature which both educated and entertained. Second-year results brought equally spectacular success even with students who had been previously diagnosed as "learning disabled."

Beginning with listening, speaking, and comprehension skills, we dictated instructions for the formation of the letters which stood for the 42 speech sounds they already knew how to say and had been using in words and conversation for several years. First graders then applied these letter combinations, using 28 rules of spelling, in a dictated list of 850 of the most commonly used English words which they then read aloud and used in oral and written sentences. They began to read interesting, classic literature in their ninth week of instruction. They were happy, involved children, learning at their individual full potential. I was as impressed as their parents were delighted.

I discovered that a complete phonetic system teaches the common correct spelling patterns of the sounds of speech.

A COMPLETE PHONETIC SYSTEM TEACHES CORRECT SPELLING PATTERNS

This fact is virtually unknown among educators and publishers because, generally, it has not been taught for nearly seventy years at the teacher training level. Can't be, you say? I learned these phonetic "facts" and 47 spelling, plural, and syllabication rules from a retired teacher who had learned them from another retired teacher who was educated before the turn of this century. A footnote in one of our teaching manuals clarifies some finer points. It says, "Actually, there are over 250 sounds and as many dictionary key symbols that can be used to designate all the nuances in all the dialects of English throughout the world. However, the use of 42 'pure' sounds and 71 'common' phonograms (one or more letters which stand for one 'voiced' sound in a given word) is a sufficient 'working set' to enable primary children to successfully spell the vast majority of all English words which are in their spoken or comprehensive vocabularies." So, if this information is known, why are we still having a problem?

Notable recent and past examples of misinformation on the subject follow: For instance, the success of the prolific *Hooked on Phonics* ads do show that there is still a keen interest in phonics which is causing concern in the entrenched reading establishment now selling their latest anti-phonics invention called "whole language." The media ads for *Hooked on Phonics* confuse the issue by claiming that setting the "44 sounds" of English to music is "phonics." It is *some* "phonics," but only about one-third of the known phonetic system.

Not to be outdone, even the growing number of IBM's *Writing to Read* critics wrongly refer to that 42-phoneme, invented-spelling system, as "phonics." It has been used in 85% of all school districts in the country which should be proof enough that the media needs to address the subject. How can board members be convinced to spend money encouraging children to spell food, do, dew, due, through, fruit, you and shoe as "food," "doo," "doo," "doo," "throo," "froot," "yoo" and "shoo"? John Henry Martin of the IBM system suggests that such false spelling is just fine -- as do many other authorities. We beg to differ; it was a colossal failure with the *Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA)* system many years ago and it is now proven a failure again. Invented spelling does not "map" accurately to book print for reading. Children's minds, programmed with the wrong information, will take seven times longer for unteaching and reteaching than if we had just put in the right information at the outset. Where will we find the time?

Some critics are suggesting that "businesses" like IBM should not be involved in education, yet, the large textbook publishing houses are multi-billion dollar businesses. Like the late Dr. Jeanne Chall, Dr. Barbara Bateman, and Siegfried Engelmann, I believe they need to prove that the programs they publish meet research criteria before they are foisted on the taxpayer and the taxpayers' children enmasse. There should be some "truth-in-packing" standards for these publishing houses in something other than the research findings and testing instruments they purchase for their own programs

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"INVENTED" SPELLING WAS (AND IS) A COLOSSAL FAILURE

But, back to the phonics question. With straight and sincere faces, schools and teachers using whole language programs posture that "they teach phonics," and those who are using "decodable" text readers and the accompanying visual worksheets declare "they also teach phonics," and they do -- to a degree. They tell children at least one sound for each of the 26 letters of the alphabet plus a few common digraphs such as th, sh, and ch over about a 3 to 4-year period of time. "Hooked on Phonics" does

approximately the same thing only they set it to music. Instead of long-term help, this is enough "phonics" to be dangerous. Incredible as it may seem, high school children are dropping out of school as functional illiterates because they are unable to sound out a simple, phonetically-regular word like "fight." They try to sound each separate letter because they have never been taught that a letter combination like *igh* simply says its first or long sound.

Lest we think the debate has run its course, the February, 1992 Phi Delta Kappan ran another anti-phonics article from Canadian citizen, Professor Frank Smith, 30-year architect of American reading instruction, now touting the whole word, whole language approach. In the article, he declared that the words, *I, you, they, is, are, was, of, by, to, have, has,* and *mother* are "flagrant exceptions to the rule." What rule? It is quite apparent that he has never learned that **ou** and **ey**, should be taught with more than one sound, and that the digraph th has two sounds. Single letters ***i, s, y,*** and ***o***, have more than one sound (easily taught to children in grade one) not to mention his apparent ignorance of the use of silent final e's. *Of* is the only word which cannot be easily explained phonetically if the teacher first knows, and then teaches, 47 rules of orthography.

Children need to learn rules by their application in words to give them practice in analytical thinking and deductive reasoning as well as the obvious help it affords in learning to spell. Yes, spelling is considered harder than reading, but it is also much more easily organized because of the rules.

A "60 Minutes" guest professor several years ago expressed heated concern about black children who "turn off" to reading at the third grade level, but he forgot to mention that these once eager learners have been systematically thwarted by a too-little-too-late, picture clue, phony phonics system which has crippled them for life. This has now blossomed into a demand for "decodable" text. On the surface, this sounds plausible, but we must ask, "Decodable by ***what*** phonics content?"

Nationwide test scores decline at the third grade level (and not just for Afro-Americans) but education reformers have failed to point out (is it possible they don't know?) the simple fact that these children never could read *independently*. Grades one and two found them simply memorizing simple, short, three-letter words, using pictures and their knowledge of the single letters of the alphabet, in look-say programs with insipid, "dumbed-down" Dick and Jane vocabulary. Children who have been watching National Geographic, Discovery, and some other not-so-savory fare on TV are not remotely interested in reading such inane drivel even when they are sight-oriented enough to memorize the words. When the words get longer and the picture clues fewer, lo! we have non-readers, and this concerned professor declares that it is because "their female teachers are not qualified to teach them what it is going to be like to be an Afro-American man in the coming century." The children already know it won't be pleasant if they can't read, and for that, they need no more lessons.

The two major adult literacy groups who unfortunately get all the ink and whatever meager funding is available, teach the same kind of so-called "phonics" in sight-oriented programs offering more of what caused their unfortunate clients to fail to learn reading and spelling in the first place. And surely, we should all know by now that the 100,000-member (or is it more?) International Reading Association (IRA), made up primarily of reading professors and teachers of remedial reading plus giant textbook publishing houses and their representatives, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children are in charge of the status quo. Serious reformers and holders of *the purse strings to change*, such as foundations, concerned corporations, legislators, and board members, should cease seeking their counsel. They give "lip service" to the teaching of phonics, but I have never met even one member of any of these organizations who had ever studied a complete phonetic system.

THE I.R.A., N.C.T.E. and N.A.E.Y.C. GIVE "LIP SERVICE" TO TEACHING PHONICS

We do need to keep in mind that these groups are not only the 50-year-old architects of the present illiteracy, but that their membership, the remedial reading teachers and the textbook publishers, profit twice over on the backs of their victims. Oregon's State Department of Education now establishes criteria for and adopts "low level" reading materials as standard practice and no one questions it.

One of the biggest surprises is that our good old phonics advocate, our dear, departed Dr. Rudolph Flesch, our pro-phonics spokesperson since 1955, didn't know that one could teach "do" and "so" and "have" and "save" in the same phonics program and declared as much in a Reader's Digest article several years ago. He knew so little about complete phonics that he thought that the words *do* and *have* should be taught as sight words. No wonder teachers made jokes about his theories and he lost all credibility with the *reading establishment.*

Many simplistic phonics programs mislead when they teach foolish rules like, "When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking," which is true about 14% of the time if one looks at a group of diphthongs such as *ai, ay, au, oi, ui, eu, oy, oo, ea, ei, ie, ey, ou.* Yet, the International Reading Association's testimony pointed to this rule to prove to members of a 1984 Senate hearing on reading just how absurd phonics instruction is. Though pro-phonics advocates had ample time and opportunity to rebut, they were speechless! So much for my side either not knowing the answers -- or not knowing when to speak up.

Not to be outdone, the federal government's contribution to mass confusion includes a 1985 compilation of reading research entitled, *Becoming a Nation of Readers (BNR).* "Explicit" phonics (teaching the sound/symbol relationships ahead of words and/or picture clues) is recommended from the data compiled. However, this report doesn't say what phonics or anything about how to teach it. If Dr. Jean Osborne of the Center for the Study of Reading (the group which produced the report) "knows a good phonics program when she sees it," why doesn't she tell teachers what it is so that it cannot be misinterpreted? The *BNR* phonics chapter is so garbled with misinformation (we assume the research itself is at fault), it is little wonder schools aren't paying any attention. Also, the government appropriated little funding to distribute this report to teachers and textbook selection committees who need it. Meantime, The Riggs Institute has prepared a paragraph-by-paragraph critique on the phonics chapter in *BNR* (just e-mail your request to us).

BECOMING A NATION OF READERS IS FULL OF DISTORTIONS

Former Secretary of Education William Bennett demonstrated some remarkable leadership in trying to shed light on the subject with his *What Works I and II, First Lessons, Illiteracy in America, BNR, Private Sector Alternatives for Preventing Reading Failure and Preventing Reading Failure: An Examination of the Myths of Reading Instruction,* all of which discuss the phonics issue at considerable length (see our

catalog). Yet, in 1986, when flatly ordered by a unanimous vote of the Congress to provide schools with a consumer information report within one year, to address whether existing reading curricula, particularly on the phonics question, met the criteria of research recommendations, he sat on his hands! The study mandated by Public Law 99-425, better known as the "Zorinsky Amendment," was finally completed in June, 1993. However, the research team admitted that they didn't judge the phonics applications on *when* they are taught which just happens to be the primary difference between "implicit" and "explicit" phonics. So, the report, seven years late, was seriously flawed! Wouldn't the Food and Drug Administration be in contempt of Congress if it attempted to sidestep a similar mandate from the Congress? What is the practical difference, folks? And where is Ralph Nader when we really need him?

Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print, by Marilyn Jager-Adams, is another government attempt to assuage public outrage over reading reform. Though in many respects it is quite an exceptional book, Ms. Jager-Adams talks all around the phonics question. She seems to realize that there is a great deal more to phonics, and the role it should play in beginning reading and spelling instruction or that the research has examined, but it is also quite clear that she doesn't know exactly what it is. Operating from a no-research (or no knowledge of research) basis, archaic state textbook commissions in twenty-one (21) states still mandate a state empowered and funded textbook monopoly in reading programs to the great detriment of their students. Of these states, only five rate above the national SAT-score averages while, of the 28 states allowing a free market, only five states rate below the national average. Are quality control people interested in this data? And, speaking of monopolies, aren't there federal anti-trust statutes to protect the consumer in all other areas? Why local boards of education allow states to mandate a monopoly in reading instruction - particularly programs which are proven to be neither safe nor effective - boggles the mind! If states can do this (and some would say, violate federal anti-trust statutes in the process), why was the federal-level Department of Education, at its creation, specifically denied any access to, or control of, the curriculum our children must, by law, use? Isn't that the same as telling the U.S. Food and Drug Administration they could have nothing to do with food and drugs? Or, if you do, do it only at the state level? One has to do with protecting the human body, the other with protecting the human mind. Now that we truly are "A Nation at Risk," don't we need a congressional investigation or a grand jury to determine who lobbied what exclusions into place with the establishment of a cabinet-level Department of Education during the Carter administration? And why doesn't the U.S. Department of Justice convene a grand jury to examine the evidence as to just who influences the criteria in each of those twenty-one states which, in turn, keeps the status quo in reading instruction in place in all 50 states? With the current crop of

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WHY DOESN'T THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE CONVENE A GRAND JURY TO INVESTIGATE?

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illiterates -- some 90 million or about 48% of the adult population -- is anyone concerned?

To bring the magnitude of the problem into focus: A grant invitation from the U.S. Department of Justice used the following definition for literacy in the May 17, 1991, Federal Register: "Literacy is the ability to accurately and fluently read and write what one can talk about, hear, and understand." According to this definition, virtually all first graders move to second grade as illiterates in this country. Currently, in the year 2000 as this article is being updated, the national goal is to teach children to read "by grade three." How ridiculous! What's wrong with by the end of kindergarten. This writer doubts there is even an intent to bring print skills to speech and comprehension levels with the present whole-word memorization

system. The Department advertised for proposals to teach remedial teachers to teach multi-sensory, intensive phonics to incarcerated illiterate youth in homes for juvenile delinquents. If it works at this level, why not do it to begin with?

Confusion also governs well-meaning corporate involvement. David Kearns, former Xerox CEO and after that with the Department of Education, speaks widely about school culpability in not preparing young people to enter the job market. Yet he authorized the expenditure of $5 million on research within his own corporation to determine how the brain functions in the learning process apparently not knowing that some very productive work on that subject was already published in 1937 by Dr. Samuel T. Orton - a neuropathologist who spent a lifetime experimenting with real students to find an early answer to "learning disabilities," as well as a promising answer to winning the brain race with normal children. We can applaud Mr. Kearns for his very good intentions, but also think he should have pursued some homework as should the current crop of neuroscientists, now in receipt of billions of dollars in federal funding under the auspices of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Dr. Reid Lyon who is quoted in the Los Angeles Times as saying, "Now wait a minute, folks, we're learning a lot about how the brain functions, but it will take another ten years for the researchers to produce something suitable for the classroom."

No one protested because virtually no one knows that methods have existed since the late 1920's which are brain-based and are effective for intervention with learning disorders and even more effective with normal primary children. I leave it to you to ponder why Dr. Lyon isn't interested to know about these "facts" of reading reform in America. Some researchers say that Dr. Orton didn't present proper evidence and that he could have been wrong about right and left brain dominance, etc. Few understand or are interested in the fact that he solved the teaching problem anyway and found an answer to neurological discrimination in teaching methods in his discovery of the full cognitive benefits of multi-sensory instruction.

And, yes, Orton's findings have a great deal to do with phonics, or the lack thereof, when and how it is taught. Instead of trying to figure out what English teachers knew, he worked in tandem with teachers who were all trained before the turn of this century; these teachers knew what is not generally known today. They regularly taught the structure of correct English spelling and its rules. How long does it take for a nation or world to forget a body of information entirely? In this case - the real structure of English words? Might we lose this forever? Considering the growing movement to change the English spelling system, must we still ask that when we lose it, will anyone be here who knows what was lost? Will our data banks remember when we don't? I attended the Harvard Brain Conference in November of 1999 and personally witnessed a very famous neuroscientist presenting phonics instruction to about 900 teachers by writing **"buh" "aaah" "tuh"** on the overhead with an flat statement that this was the way to teach the word "bat" using phonics. Not one teacher protested! Did they not know in this day of the "phonemic awareness" and the "decodable" text frenzy, that they had just been taught five distinct sounds of English, not three??

Mr. McGraw, of McGraw Hill Publishing (now the second largest publisher in the U.S.), spearheaded the Business Council for Effective Literacy, apparently not realizing that his own publishing company might be a big part of the problem. And this continues. Today, he is the proud and rich owner of the old and used-to-be-very-good-phonics-and-literature-based *Open Court* program -- that is until something quite awful happened to the phonics portion of it. Now, it teaches one sound for each of the letters of the alphabet in the entire first year of instruction, and offers a broader variety of visually-oriented workbooks and the best 100% "decodable" text in the country. As a small test, see how many and what size words you can write with that much phonics. Open Court, none the less, and now under McGraw Hill

ownership, is blessed by the state of Texas, California, the Los Angeles Times and Mrs. Marion Josephs, phonics proponent grandmother of the California State Board of Education.

Ross Perot, the benevolent Texas billionaire and well-known wannabe president, known widely in Texas for his untiring work for educational reform, doesn't seem to know that the primary basis for his own children receiving an excellent academic background was because the expensive, Dallas academy in which they were enrolled has used a simple, but effective and inexpensive, "Orton-based" spelling and writing program for the past 35 years.

Does our former First Lady Barbara Bush really understand why one her children had trouble reading? If she knew, wouldn't her work for literacy possibly accomplish a lot more by addressing the real issues facing it? Unless we want to continue to admit to the world that we no longer know how to teach our own language to our own children, we need to exhibit some curiosity, at least, about the primary root causes of the illiteracy problem in the English speaking world. We need to truly examine what's between the covers of the materials our teachers must use to teach language skills. We need to stop consulting the failing "experts" and rely on some facts and common sense. While we are at it, we need to find out why existing research doesn't cover that exact point. Ordinary people need to believe, once again, that teaching reading is not the next thing to brain surgery. We need to put someone in charge who is curious and knows how to determine cause before designing cure. Our social and economic future is very much at stake.

And, yes, we do need to list a reliable set of spelling patterns (phonograms) which are proven to work through scientific research. Dr. Orton's work and experience is not considered to be *reliable* or *scientific* because, apparently, there wasn't another innovative doctor across the hall trying a different method on the same kind of patients with yet a third party looking on. Nevertheless his methods have stood the test of time and perhaps two dozen programs which derive from its concepts have survived into the next century -- many of them being promoted by non-profit agencies. Certainly, there is more than one workable list, but there are also far too many differences in the various lists teachers are asked to use by various publishers who have no"reliable, replicable research base" to prove efficacy. The subject of the great debate needs, finally, to be determined after some forty-five (45) years. The Riggs Institute's phonics list is shown here. While we wait for some curious researcher's findings, you may find it helpful as a comparison with your own:

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b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, qu, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, z a, e, i, o, u, er, ir, ur, wor, ear, sh, th, ee, ay/ai, ow/ou, aw/au, ew/eu, oy/oi, oo, ch, ng, ea, ar, ck, ed, or, wh, oa, ey/ei, eigh, igh, ie, kn, gn, wr, ph, dge, oe, ui, tch, ti, si, ci, ough

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Since many of the above 71 phonograms represent multiple sounds, there are 118 combinations which are taught together with their applications for spelling; you will note there are no two- or three-letter "blends" listed which retain their own individual sound value ever *after* being combined. We use only vowel or consonant digraphs which change sounds by having been combined or represent sounds normally depicted with only one letter. These are better taught during dictated spelling lessons, otherwise they may destroy auditory discrimination, phonemic awareness, and the auditory, verbal, and visual processing skills needed for correct spelling and fluent reading. Primary children learn these 118 combinations quite easily in four of the first nine weeks of school. They are infinitely easier to memorize than is the entire English lexicon. When these are taught first, a "whole" or completely integrated

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language arts system can become a reality. Subtracting nine weeks from the life of a child to teach the basis for what he/she needs to know for all other learning for the rest of their lives may seem exorbitant to some who want to pass up everything between "Go" and "Finish," but, we say it is time well spent. It will be a great pity if we give up on the end goals of teaching the integrated "strands" of the language arts before we discover how to make it work. We must then continue to admit to the world that we have forgotten how to teach our own language to our own children.

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